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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 001062

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)  
SUBJECT: Regional Opposition Malaise

Refs: (A) Minsk 838, (B) Minsk 728

Classified by Charge Constance Phlipot for Reasons 1.4  
(B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: In the past month Poloffs visited three mid-sized Belarusian cities, each an hour or two from Minsk, to the west, northeast and southeast. In each we found a shrinking and demoralized opposition struggling to stay alive. Most were at a loss as to how to promote themselves to the populace, in the face of fears of government repression. Contacts between pro-democracy forces and local independent newspapers were surprisingly poor. Based on past travel, Post unfortunately believes the picture presented in these three cities is typical of that across Belarus. When asked what could change their fortunes around, all asked for increased access to independent information, including radio broadcasting from abroad. End summary.

Bobruisk: Pressure Up, but Hope Remains  
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¶2. (C) Emboffs met August 10 with representatives of political parties and civil society in Bobruisk, two hours southeast of Minsk. Political parties were represented by the UCP, BNF, and Kozulin Social-Democrats; NGOs by Partnership, Malady Front and the Belarus Free Trade Union. The opposition in Bobruisk is more united than is the norm and, unlike in many other regional cities, these groups all have worked together for some time. [Note: the pro-democracy Communists were noticeably absent.] In fact, all these groups are working with Aleksandr Kozulin's Social-Democratic party to collect signatures for Kozulin's People's Will movement. Such unity is lacking on the national level.

¶3. (C) All agreed that repression and fear tactics against civil society are increasing. The local UCP leader was recently fined USD 600 for organizing an ABA/CEELI seminar in Bobruisk, and most of the civil society members at the meeting had been fired from their job in the past year. They said that five years ago the typical fine for civil disobedience was USD 15, now it is over USD 1,000. They claimed everyone in Bobruisk who ran as an independent (i.e.- anti-Lukashenko) candidate in the 2004 parliamentary elections has been fired. Malady Front reported MF member's parents have been threatened with the loss of their jobs and student members have been ordered by the GOB to work in Chernobyl contaminated areas after graduation [note: Emboffs have heard the same from youth groups in other cities]. No party or NGO in Bobruisk has been able

to find or register legal office space, so these groups have no place to meet (Emboffs met them in a park). Almost all claimed their organizations have not been able to attract new members for several years. The only exception was the local social democrat, who said her party benefited from its recent ouster of former party leader Nikolay Statkevich.

14. (C) Despite this pressure, the group expressed some hope. They had recently succeeded in hosting two local conferences to choose delegates for the opposition's single candidate process. Although police came and filmed the events, they allowed them to proceed. All our interlocutors agreed that the people in rural areas and small towns near Bobruisk do not support Lukashenko, but rather vote for him from a lack of information. Malady Front regularly sends members to nearby villages and towns to speak to people about alternatives to Lukashenko; the local MF leader claimed these people are usually excited to talk to his group. The party leaders said they wished they had resources to pass out fliers to inform citizens of their legal rights and to highlight the growing price discrepancies in basic foodstuffs and commodities between rural areas and Minsk (they claimed the GOB is keeping prices low in Minsk). All felt the local independent press is too timid and afraid to cover political issues. However, the party leaders admitted their parties did little to publicize the GOB's election fraud in 2004 elections.

A Timid Bobruisk Press  
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15. (C) On August 10 Emboffs also met with three members of Bobruisk's independent press. Bobruisk has four independent papers: the weekly Bobruisk Courier (5,000 copies), the weekly Telegraf (20,000), and the bi-weekly Commercial Courier (15,000) and Vcherniy Bobruisk (12,000). In contrast, the two local state papers have a total circulation of 15,000 copies. Despite this advantage in numbers, all agreed the independent press operates at a disadvantage. They complained they do not have access to government officials or the ever-popular crime reporting from police; at times the city government tells them to avoid certain stories; and in November the mayor's ideological office warned all businesses not to advertise in the independent press, but especially not in Bobruisk Courier. Because of this they are losing circulation. Moreover, the independent papers are charged twice as much as the state papers for use of the post office for distribution, further limiting their circulations.

16. (C) All admitted to practicing self-censorship and being much less critical of the government since October's elections. Of the four independent papers, Bobruisk Courier is considered the most "oppositional" because once a month they run one page of news on the local parties and NGOs. However, during the parliamentary campaign not even Bobruisk Courier reported on any local campaigns, either pro-government or independent, "because no one asked us to." The editor from Vcherniy Bobruisk said he is "careful" and avoids provocative issues. While the other three avoid politics, they said they can get away with careful reporting on the local economy and society, even if it is mildly critical of government. Some popular stories they printed covered rising rent and utility prices, and local unemployment.

Luckless in Lida  
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17. (C) On July 29 Poloffs met with local party leaders in

Lida, western Belarus. Three people, representing the UCP, BNF and Kozulin's BSDPNG met Poloffs on the street and led them to a nearby cafe, as they have no offices in that city of 200,000. They lamented the fact few in Lida even know political parties exist. Lida has no independent newspapers, and all expressed frustration their party leaders rarely if ever visit the city. The BSDPNG is planning to go door-to-door, on behalf of former Respublika MP Valeriy Frolov, with a petition calling for changing the electoral law. The other parties had no plan on how to promote themselves, but complained about GOB repression and how party candidates in the 2004 elections lost their jobs because of their political activities. The only success civil society has had in Lida was in registering a local branch of the Belarus Language Society. The local BLS now has 200 members, mostly from the Lida Pedagogical University, and is growing. They have not had any trouble with the regime and local government has allowed them to meet regularly, unobstructed.

Borisov's Mayor: Its all Great!!

18. (C) On August 17 Ambassador met the mayor of Borisov, who lauded the city's growing economy, low unemployment, high pensions, and many private (and solvent) businesses. The average income is increasing and the economy is attracting large investment. The mayor told Ambassador the local opposition parties are filled with "unlucky, unsuccessful people who complain about the government but do nothing more." He dismissed the parties as having no influence on society. When Ambassador asked if the mayor had any dialogue with the opposition, he replied that it was minimal and not constructive.

Borisov's Opposition: Things are Bad!!

19. (C) On August 17 Ambassador met with local parties in Borisov, northeast of Minsk. Present were members of the BNF, Kozulin's BSDPNG, and two youth NGOs. All were optimistic that once a single opposition candidate is chosen, they would have a chance to prevail, but only if the public actually notices the "unjustness and fabrications in society." Contrary to the mayor's

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statements, the activists claimed Borisov's economy is worsening because large scale, high-level theft is rampant. The authorities are trying to modernize bankrupt industries, but have no money to do so. At least 38 percent of Borisov enterprises are bankrupt and there is no large-scale investment.

10. (C) The party members informed Ambassador that their main setback is the lack of an independent press. One activist spoke of his newspaper, the last remaining independent paper in Borisov. [Note: The mayor told Ambassador that the town had five newspapers, four of which were independent.] Unfortunately, the paper was being liquidated that day for allegedly printing editorials that insulted the editor of the local government newspaper. Seventy percent of his newspaper's profits are from advertisements, but, as in Bobruisk, businesses are afraid to pay for advertising for fear of losing their enterprise.

11. (C) The activists explained how the GOB successfully controls society using softened "Stalin-era" tactics. Teachers must preach the government's ideology to the students and make sure they behave. If a student is caught promoting or practicing ideas not supporting the GOB, then the teacher will be blamed and sometimes fired. Local judges must rule in accordance with GOB orders or lose their job. Bosses who do not fire their employees when so

ordered by the GOB risk losing their own jobs. One activist presented the medical application he received when he went to the doctor. The application, to be filled out by patients before their appointment, did not concern itself with the patient's health. Rather, all the questions centered on the patient's personal life and activities, such as "What countries have you been to?", "What was the reason for the trip?", and "Are you a member of a political party?"

¶12. (C) More alarming, these pro-democracy activists said their parties are losing members, as most people are tired of protesting without seeing any change. These leaders feel most Belarusians believe no alternative to Lukashenko exists, and that little will ever change in Belarus. The party members criticized the national opposition leaders for wasting all their money on pointless seminars, which they viewed as helpful, but attended by only the "elite" of the parties.

Comment

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¶13. (C) Unfortunately, the situation in these three cities appears typical of that across Belarus, and mirrors what Emboffs saw earlier this summer in Molodechno and Grodno (reftels). Part of the opposition's doldrums is that they are currently between election campaigns. Borisov's pro-democracy forces, in particular, were active and impressive during the 2004 parliamentary campaign. Hope remains that their activities and morale will improve once a single opposition candidate is chosen and the opposition starts challenging Lukashenko for the presidency. However, much of the current malaise is also a reflection of the growing hopelessness of their situation. After years of struggle the opposition appears no closer to achieving democracy. Over the past 12 months especially the GOB has increased its repressive acts, so much of the opposition now struggles to feed their families, let alone fight for democracy. It is uncertain whether they can rally their forces for the 2006 presidential campaign.

PHLIPOT